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Honors LECTURE

The Wolf of Agobio

(PROLEGOMENA TO THE MEDICAL HUMANITIES)

by
John M. Opitz, M.D., D.Sci. (hc), M.D. (hc)
Adjunct Professor of History and Philosophy,
Biology (Genetics), Medicine (WAMI Program),
and of Veterinary Science at Montana State University

June 14, 1991

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Illustrated by Len Eckel

Honors Night Program
Montana State University
June 14, 1991

Dedicated to a child, and all children yet to be born,
to live with an "inner God," in hope and peace.

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In 1983 MSU began the tradition of publishing the Annual Honors Lecture. We are pleased to make Dr. Opitz' lecture the eighth in our series.

THE WOLF OF AGOBIO
(PROLEGOMENA TO THE MEDICAL HUMANITIES)

VERE DIGNUM ET JUSTUM EST . . .

In acknowledging my gratitude for the great honor of this invitation, let me also express my particular pleasure of being in your company. Even though you do not see much of me on this campus, I am enormously proud of being one of you—a fellow student and staff member, and want you to know that I cherish this campus as a home-away-from-home, my true intellectual home in Montana, a community of scholars which I miss in Helena.

However, a strong bond of friendship and many shared interests tie me to you and especially to the MSU humanists with whom I have been privileged to work on the Montana Committee for the Humanities over the last, almost four years.

Which brings me to the reason for the strange title of this allocution.

INTRODUCTION

AT the January meeting in Billings of the Montana Committee for the Humanities, I began my term as chair for this year with some remarks on the truly desperate spiritual state of this nation and voiced my passionate con-

viction that the humanities must be at the very core of a national recovery program—a program that will also set radically different funding priorities for primary and secondary education, public institutions of higher learning, cultural events and activities, and for scholarly work and public programming in all branches of the humanities. The distinguished Director of the Montana Committee for the Humanities, Dr. Margaret Kingsland, extracted a promise from me that I would enter my remarks into the record, and I hope she and you will forgive me for going about it in this way.

I am glad I took some time to mull the matter over, for, I think that, at that already rather distant and somewhat informal occasion, I was still unable to see the forest for the trees, continuing to mistake the signs and symptoms for the diagnosis. With your leave then, I should like to have another go at the subject in an attempt to frame the problem and possible solution in more general terms, that is to say, in terms of metaphor. And one of these metaphors is the story of the wolf—indeed "the very fierce Wolf" of Agobio from the legends of the *Fioretti*,[1] one of the most beautiful legacies of the medieval world to us.

THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

THE manifestations, as I see them, of our nation's "sickness unto death" (Kierkegaard) are so numerous, self-evident and well-documented by scholars, commentators and the daily press that a detailed enumeration is hardly necessary. I will offer only a partial glimpse here, gleaned from daily, weekly and other sources.

- We now rank 24th in the world in infant mortality; in this fiscal year $25 million of new federal money is proposed to fight infant mortality. The defense budget is proposed at $300 billion, with most of the "peace-dividend" going to bail out hundreds of failed savings and loan (S&L) institutions and other "fiscal black holes." In 1990 the population of the U.S. spent $5 billion at movie box offices,[2] an estimated $40 billion for illegal drugs, $44 billion on alcoholic beverages, $37 billion on tobacco products, and $38.6 billion on prescription drugs.[3]
- The U.S. has one of the highest child-poverty rates of all industrialized nations—(about 12.6 million children total, or about one in five youngsters)—another 2.2 million having been added in the 1980s, a time of uninterrupted economic growth.[4]
- Ten other nations outspend the U.S. for their education systems,[5] but being underfunded is only one of the many reasons for its wretched quality (especially at the primary and secondary levels) which stunts the mind, impoverishes the spirit and constricts the focus of life concerns.
- The epidemic of drug addiction, to be fought in "the drug war," $150 million going to Peru alone—is not the disease but only a symptom of it. Presently, about one-tenth of all newborn infants in the U.S. are prenatally exposed to one or more "illicit" drugs—mostly "crack"; this amounts to the birth of some 375,000 injured children per year.[6] To this we must add the birth of about 500,000 infants with fetal alcohol exposure, a condition that has become the commonest cause of mental retardation and threatens the survival of the final vestiges of tribal integrity in the U.S.
- The resurgence of murderous "hate groups" such as the "White Aryan Resistance" and activity of racist "skin-head" organizations in 34 states of the U.S. joined with cults of "greed and power" such as "Scientology."[7, 8]
- The national epidemic of child abuse which, in Montana alone, involved some 9,274 kids in investigations of neglect and child abuse in 1989—a fraction of the actual number of cases.[9] This problem is highly correlated with spouse abuse.
- The steady increase in the violent crime rate—(up 10 percent in 1990 as reported by the FBI). In 1990 in the U.S. this accounted for 23,600 murders, 103,000 rapes, 642,000 armed robberies, 1,050,000 cases of aggravated assault, 7,872,000 instances of larceny theft, and 1,620,000 motor vehicle thefts. The murder rate in New York (2,245 in 1990, over six per day) is explained by law-enforcement individuals as due to "availability of drugs. . .and of handguns."[10] On our recent pilgrimage to Washington for the annual Jefferson Lecture, Dr. Kingsland and I were astounded at the size of the headquarters of the National Rifle Association, and the fact that the President of the U.S.A. is a member.
- The results of a national survey of U.S. morality which showed that for $10 million, seven percent of those surveyed would kill a stranger; most workers "goof-off" seven hours

per week; about one-half of workers regularly call in sick when they are not; one-third of all married Americans have had an affair; nine of ten citizens lie regularly, two-thirds favor capital punishment, one-third would volunteer to throw the switch on the electric chair and one of seven carries a gun or has one in his car. The survey concluded that there was "absolutely no moral consensus in the 1990s," and that "religion plays almost no role in shaping most lives; about two-thirds of those surveyed said they would be wealthier.[11]

- The S&L catastrophe[12] involving, as of September 1990, 402 S&L institutions that have failed, with "serious criminal activity" responsible for the failure in over 60 percent of cases. Some 316 individuals have been convicted, thousands of fraud and embezzlement cases are pending, and 654 FBI investigations are under way. The Lincoln S&L disaster involved a loss of $2.5 billion alone; its director, Charles Keating, was called "the greediest man in America. It is charged that he and 10 relatives whom he placed on the board of directors, took $634 million from that bank in salaries, bonuses and profits. Please remember in this context Mr. Ivan Boesky's commencement address to the University of California—Berkeley in 1985 in which he said: "Greed is all right by the way. . . I want you to know that. I think greed is healthy. You can be greedy and still feel good about yourself."

To this I could add the crisis in health insurance, government subsidies of the alcohol and tobacco industries while failing to support adequately the arts and humanities, the deficiencies of commercial television programming, the rate of motor vehicle accidents, divorces, suicides, insurance and nursing home scams, the poverty rate and dozens of related matters to round out the list of manifestations of our national malady of spirit. I have made this enumeration one that affects many of our citizens directly; however, indirectly these facts and conditions affect *all* of us, together with the legacy of despoliation and befouling of our environment, and the subversion of human rights by an unprincipled government and a weak judiciary.

REACTIONS

AMONG commentators on this state of affairs I have chosen only two. The first is Juanita Kidd Stout, a musician and the first black woman in the U.S. to be elected to a state supreme court and presently the Senior Judge in the Pennsylvania Court of Common Pleas.[12] Her comments and reactions are couched in traditional terms of moral outrage which are firmly rooted in the history and principles of Western ethics and morality. After reviewing the cases of John Poindexter, VSI Co./Fairchild Industries, the Cordes corporation, the 1989 ethics investigation of seven members of the U.S. Senate and several members of the House of Representatives (including Jim Wright and Tony Coelho), the John Tower confirmation hearings, the FBI investigation of the South Carolina State House, Gary Hart and the 1988 Presidential race, the S&L disaster, Ivan Boesky and "insider trading," and the Beechnut apple juice case, she comments: "These vignettes illustrate the types of fraud, dishonesty, greed and lying that pervade all walks of life in America today. They are but a few examples of people who have engaged in criminal, corrupt, unethical and immoral conduct for political expediency or greed. . . A study of history,

philosophy and religion reveals a strong consensus as to certain basic ethical values that transcend cultures and time. . . They are honesty, integrity, promise-keeping, fidelity and loyalty, fairness, caring for others, respect for others, responsible citizenship, the pursuit of excellence and accountability." Justice Stout paraphrases Theodore Roosevelt to the effect that "a man educated in mind and not in morals is a menace to society" and quotes from Dostoyevsky's *The Insulted and the Injured*: "It is not the brains that matter most but that which guides them—the character, the heart, the generous qualities, progressive ideas."

A far less likely commentator and one unencumbered with the sonority of sentiment and the principles that guide Juanita Stout, is the late Lee Atwater, former Republican campaign manager, who wrote an extraordinary biographical essay for *Life* magazine less than two months before his untimely death on March 29, 1991 at the age of 40.[13] He characterizes himself as: "Unlike campaign managers in years past, I (and others like me) approach politics as only a slightly politer form of ground battle. We are hired guns." Others characterized him as a "fierce and ugly campaigner," but: "Frankly I didn't care what anyone called me so long as we won." When he was diagnosed as having an inoperable, fatal brain tumor he ". . . stated: 'Damn it, I am not going to let this thing beat me! I am Lee Atwater and I am not going to die.'" And after "working" and "doing research" on his problem of faith, he has, if not a death-bed metanoia, then at least a remarkable insight: "Long before I was struck with cancer, I felt something stirring in American Society. It was a sense among the people of the country—Republicans and Democrats alike—that something was missing from their lives, something crucial. I was trying to position the Republican Party to take advantage of it. But I wasn't exactly sure what 'it' was. My illness helped me to see what was missing in society and what was missing in me: a little heart, a lot of brotherhood. . . It took a deadly illness to put me eye to eye with that truth, but it is a truth that the country, caught up in its ruthless ambitions and moral decay, can learn on my dime. I don't know who will lead us through the '90s, but they must be made to speak to this moral vacuum at the heart of American Society, this tumor of the soul."

THE DIAGNOSIS

I SHOULD like to submit that this "tumor of the soul" is nothing less than a state of national co-dependency, that is to say, the sum total of all of our individual failures or dysfunctions, addictions, fears, envies, and rages which have been characterized recently in the U.S. by chemical dependency counselors and social workers such as Wegscheider-Cruse, Wilson-Shaef, Beattie, Larson, Bradshaw, Black and many others dealing with alcoholics, their spouses and children and independently in Europe by psychoanalysts such as Alice Miller.[14] It was the translation of Alice Miller's *Am Anfang War Erziehung* which spoke most clearly to me as one born and partly raised in Germany, of how the demoralization of an individual child, the sapping of its spirit

and the impairment of its dignity and self respect, if multiplied over millions and generations by parents, schools and churches, can lead to the spiritual decay and death of entire nations.

One of the manifestations of co-dependency is *denial,* the inability to perceive that there is a problem, a kind of moral blindness or obtuseness curiously lacking when we analyze others but impervious of our response until and unless others hold up a mirror to us or we learn to see ourselves the way others see us.

Another manifestation of co-dependency is a progressive paralysis of will and apparent unwillingness or inability to deal regularly with the many small daily challenges to character, conduct and civic responsibility. Sooner or later this paralysis inevitably leads to inability to deal with the larger issues that confront all of us—energy—environment—conservation, overpopulation, pollution, the economy, balancing the budget, the arms race and the problem of war.

OF WARS, VICTIMS AND HOLOCAUSTS

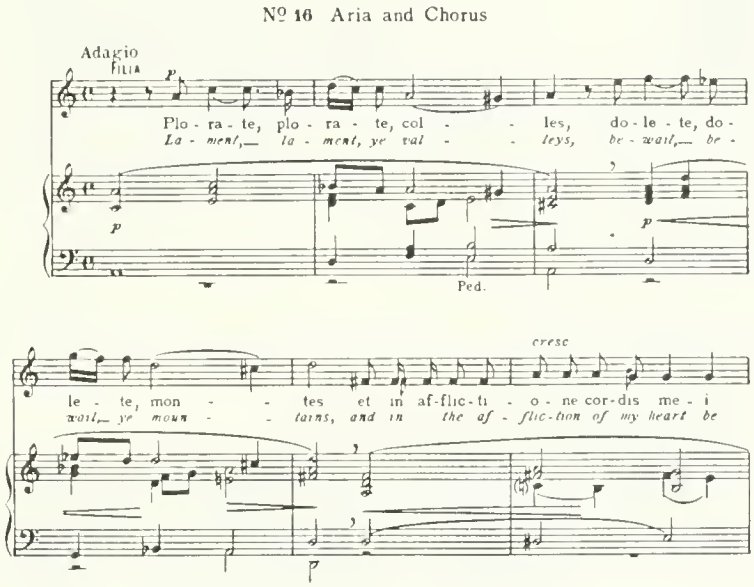
AND it was in contemplating the story of the recent Gulf war and of the tyrant Saddam Hussein, an unwanted child, that suddenly these rather abstract, and, I suspect, somewhat irritating generalities came personally and individually alive through a profoundly moving metaphor.

When Jephtha,[15] the son of Gilead by a prostitute, who had been driven "out of his father's house" by his brothers and had swept up a number of idle men who followed him into the land of Tob, was asked by the elders of Israel to help them "off" the Ammonites, Jephtha extracts from them a commitment to his leadership reminding them that he had been driven out of his father's house as an unwanted child. Then he tries to persuade the King of Ammon to be reasonable and to see things his way. And when the King refuses and Jephtha had to make up his mind to fight, ". . .the spirit of the Lord came upon Jephtha and . . .Jephtha made this vow to the Lord: 'If thou wilt deliver the Ammonites into my hands, then the first creature that comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return from them in peace shall be the Lord's, I will offer that as a whole offering.' "

At this point there is a sudden change of mood in the story which shifts from "the usual," almost soporific God-and-the-people-of-Israel remoteness to a freshness and immediacy which strongly suggests that an actual event is being retold. An event moreover, that is set forward from the historical/epic tableau and is so intensely personal and compelling in its pathos that it lends itself as an inspired metaphor of tragedy transcending individuals to speak to all people.

The first of these metamorphoses from text to metaphor was effected through the genius of Giacomo Carissimi (1605-1674),[16] a student of Claudio Monteverdi and teacher of Domenico Scarlatti and M.A. Charpentier, who became the undisputed master of the short-lived but historically important *oratorio latino* in which Carissimi "wrought works of imperishable beauty." The greatest of these is the oratorio *Jephtha* in which Carissimi follows the story in the Book of Judges faithfully to this point, rendering the word "whole-offering"

as "holocaustum." Knowing the story, the tension becomes almost unbearable to the listener of the music as Carissimi has the Historicus II (Bass) sing: *"Cum autem victor Jephte in domum suam reverteretur, occurrens ei unigenita filia sua. . ."* and then interrupts with magnificent arias and choruses celebrating the victory before telling of Jephtha's reaction: *"Heu! heu mihi! filia mea heu! decepisti me filia unigenita. . .et tu pariter, heu, filia mea decepta est. . . ."* The greatness of Carissimi is not only in his making an extremely effective metaphor of Christianity out of the fact that Jephtha (as the Bible emphasizes) had only one child who is sacrificed in this manner by her father, but in treating the daughter's response as the terrible personal tragedy it is in poetic drama which rivals the best in Greek and Latin literary tradition and in music of "imperishable beauty." As you may recall, the daughter asks her father for a two-month grace period "to roam the hills with my companions and mourn that I must die a virgin." The aria and chorus (Number 16) must be quoted in full:



Lament, lament ye valleys, sorrow, sorrow ye
mountains, and shriek with the affliction of my
heart. Lo, I shall die a virgin and shall not in my
death find consolation in my children. Then groan ye
woods, springs and rivers for the death of a virgin,
weep ye springs and brooks and for the death of a
virgin make lamentation. Weep, alas I am
mourning in the joy of my people, in the
victory of Israel, in the glory of my father,
I in my virginity childless, I an only
begotten daughter must die and no longer
live. Then tremble ye rocks and be stupefied
ye mountains, valleys and caves, and with
horror and with tearfulness be resounding.
Lament and weep ye children of Israel, lament
and weep for my virginity, yea weep for
Jephtah's only begotten daughter with
wailing notes of sadness, and lament for her...

Except in stupefied silence, as a metaphor of extreme reverence for all who have died in holocausts this passage cannot be surpassed, especially since the daughter's name is unrecorded.

The second metamorphosis occurred in my own life. I had been aware, in some inchoate way, of Jephtha as a personal metaphor ever since I received the phonograph record, a most cherished gift from Dimitri Mitropoulos of 40 years ago, some 10 years before I had my first child. Now, almost 30 years after I had my first child, Jephtha speaks to me with compelling urgency and crystal clarity of the suffering of my children and their struggles with co-dependency, and, only in very recent times of recovery, of my own pain (as an unwanted and only begotten son) of that of my mother, my father and their families, all spiritually virtually destroyed by a life and system of upbringing that broke their will and valued them solely for what they *did*, not for what they *were*. Before the work of healing and recovery can begin, we must sorrow. And thus, we sorrow and mourn for ourselves and for our children, our suffering, the childhood we never had, the humanity we never acquired, the gifts we never developed, the fears and rages we did not learn to deal with and which became our driving demons in word, thought and action, or as one would say nowadays, as obsessions, phobias and compulsions, and behavior which is individually and becomes collectively self-destructive.

For decades I issued forth every morning for battle with the Ammonites and anyone else handy including many Jebusites, Philistines, deans, hospital administrators, departmental and committee chairmen, organizations, granting agencies, the lesser ragweed and all other weeds, split infinitives, the demon dirt, sacrificing my children, indeed all human relationships, in the name of the great god "work," success and duty—the *Pflicht* that Florestan sings about in prison in Fidelio: *"Süsser Trost in meinen Herzen: Meine Pflicht hab ich getan."* To any German therefore it was evident that if Goethe and Beethoven espoused it then surely God ordained it; furthermore, there is nothing better to enable and to encourage workaholism than recognition—ah, sweet recognition. How many children have been sacrificed on the altar of "duty" and self-sacrifice—so highly blessed in the epistles of Paul, Augustine, Calvin and all of their successors who forgot that the word *Schola* means leisure.

THE WOLF OF AGOBIO

YOU all know the beloved story of the Wolf of Gubbio, ". . . the wolf which not only devoured animals but also men and women, so that all the citizens stood in great fear, because oft times he came nigh into the city. . . ," and how Francis persuaded the wolf to be reasonable and see things his way, shook on the deal and then went into town together where Francis and the tamed wolf reassured everyone, and the wolf, fed and cared for by everyone, lived for another two years before dying of old age, ". . .whereat citizens lamented much, because as long as they saw him going so gently through their city they recalled the better the virtue and sanctity of St. Francis." Thus, the *Fioretti*.

To his modern biographers the story clearly is an embarrassment and they either gloss it over or silence it. But, I would like to submit that we can ignore the Wolf of Gubbio only at the cost of grave spiritual impoverishment and the loss of an infinitely precious metaphor.[17] Johannes Jörgensen,[18] for example, treats the Wolf of Gubbio as a metaphor of Francis the peacemaker and pacifier of Italian city states such as Arezzo, Perugia, Siena and that little Italian republic with one of those inhuman savage lords of a castle who, like Werner of Urslingen, could bear a shield on the breast with the inscription: 'Enemy of Good, of Pity and of Mercy."[19] *Homo homini lupus,* indeed.

Thus, Francis went not only *extra muros* but also inside to conquer fear, brought it back tamed into the civic communion of Gubbio, that is to say into the hearts of all humankind, and joined it there with his particular legacy of gratitude, joy, humility, simplicity, peace, freedom from the tyranny of excess baggage, an understanding of the oneness and sacredness of *all* of creation, and of the primacy of thinking from the heart.

DANTE'S WOLF

LONG before the term "midlife crisis" came into vogue in the West, Dante portrayed the concept in a metaphorical manner at the beginning of the *Inferno:*

> Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
> mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,
> chè la diritta via era smarrita. . .

"When I had journeyed half of our life's way, I found myself within a shadowed forest, for I had lost the path that does not stray. . . ."[20] The wolf reappears as one of the three wild beasts—lust, pride and avarice—in the beginning of the *Inferno* as a symbol of the uncultivated life, life without reason and virtue, or as we might say now—life without the humanities. Dante described this she-wolf as one who "seemed to carry every craving in her leanness; she had already brought despair to many." But, as Mandelbaum points out in the Introduction to his beautiful new translation of the *Inferno,* Dante can begin his journey to the world of shades only "from a state *as like* to death as one can get while

still alive," while gathering "ultimate energy from only one sure fount: The fear—the absolute fear-of-death, a wood 'so bitter—death is hardly more severe.' " Dante's view of the spiritual and worldly order in the *Commedia,* later called the *divina,* is far more Thomistic/scholastic than Franciscan; and his treatment of Francis in the Divine Comedy (especially vis-a-vis Dominic) is bitterly ironic. Brother Ilario's letter on Dante's purported visit in 1308 to the Camaldolese/Augustinian monastery of Santa Croce del Corvo at the mouth of the Magra river and his request for Brother Ilario to deliver the manuscript of the *Inferno* to Uguccione della Faggiuola, probably is a later invention.[21] However, I can as easily believe Dante's need to search there for peace as I can believe the story about the Curé of Ars, John Vianney, who, over 500 years later, was four times tempted to escape to a more peaceful life—preferably in a Trappist or Franciscan/Capuchin monastery. For it had been six years before, in January 1302, that another "Wolf of Gubbio," Cante de' Gabrielli da Gubbio, when he was Podestà of Florence, had pronounced the first sentence against Dante as a thief and a swindler, condemning him to what turned out to be permanent exile. Thus, Dante is not buried in his home town, but found his final peace in the Church of Saint Francis in Ravenna.

Tackling the larger problems of our times, society and world may require some of us to withdraw from active participation, temporarily or permanently to attain one kind of peace. However, the rest of us will need to make a different kind of peace with ourselves and take note of the devastation and the howling, go out and meet the wolf and return transformed with fear tamed to live and work as free men and women, with no fear of the truth, and with the courage to change, so that at last we shall regain that humanity that was our birthright and which is the only guarantee we have of a future and of hope for our children and for our planet.

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